

Testimony of
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Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Office
Waco, Texas
Veterans Benefits Administration
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to participate in today's hearing. Recent world events have shown how essential the sacrifices made by servicemembers and their families are in preserving peace and liberty. The vital mission of serving nearly 1 million veterans and their family members is highly motivational to the 453 employees of the Waco VA Regional Office. Our employees are known for their integrity, accountability, and pride in accomplishment.

Our service area includes veterans and dependents in 164 counties in the northern two-thirds of Texas. Awards processed at our office result in annual outlays of VA benefits that total nearly \$1 billion.

While our Regional Office is located in Waco, our service area extends from El Paso to Texarkana, and from Austin to Amarillo. We provide veterans

benefits information and services from the Regional Office and 14 outbased locations. The outbased locations include the VA Medical Centers or Outpatient Clinics in El Paso, Austin, Amarillo, Big Spring, Dallas, Fort Worth, Lubbock, Marlin, Temple, and Waco. In addition, we provide service from outbased offices in Dallas and Tyler. We have 8 employees at Fort Hood, and 15 at El Paso. Congressman Chet Edwards maintains a permanent office and staff in the Regional Office building.

Our employees conduct over 380,000 telephone interviews with veterans and dependents annually. They conduct over 82,000 personal interviews annually, at the Regional Office and our outbased locations.

For the past 2 years, the Waco Regional Office has been adequately funded to support our employment, travel, and other needs. Our annual budget for FY 2001 was \$22,883,000, and our annual budget for FY 2002 is \$26,398,000. Also, we used \$395,000 to provide vocational rehabilitation and employment counseling under contracts in local communities during FY 2001.

Our full-time Homeless Veterans Coordinator provides veterans benefits counseling and assistance to homeless and indigent veterans in Dallas, Fort Worth, and surrounding areas. The Homeless Veterans Coordinator is outbased at the Dallas Day Resource Center, which is part of the North Texas Veterans Health Care System.

We have eight full-time Field Examiners who work from outbased locations throughout our service area. They assist veterans and their dependents who are unable to manage their funds, due to physical or mental disabilities.

The following veterans service organizations have full-time representatives located in the Regional Office: the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the Texas Veterans Commission.

We have provided instruction in the Training, Responsibility, Involvement, and Preparation (TRIP) Program to accredited veterans service organization representatives who work in the Regional Office building. The TRIP program involves leveraging the expertise of veterans service officers to assist our customers in providing us with more complete evidence for their claims.

Under a pilot test, we were one of the first VA regional offices involved in VA's Pre-discharge Development, Examination, and Rating Program. We provide services under the Pre-discharge program at Fort Bliss; and Fort Hood, which is the largest military installation in the free world. The program is a joint effort with the Department of the Army, the VA Health Care System in El Paso, and the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System in Temple.

The Pre-discharge program is designed to assist servicemembers who are approaching release from active duty, by processing their claims for disability compensation prior to discharge. Under the program, we have reviewed over 5,500 claims for disability compensation at Fort Hood, and nearly 1,700 claims at Fort Bliss.

We provided the first outreach services at an overseas location under the Pre-discharge program and the Transition Assistance Program. In this special initiative, we assisted members of the Texas Army National Guard serving with

the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Bosnia. Two of our employees briefed National Guard members about VA benefits, accepted claims, and evaluated disabilities while on location. The initiative received extensive coverage in the Army Times, Vanguard (VA's employee magazine), and other publications.

To assure that all veterans and their families in our service area are aware of their entitlement to VA benefits and services, we conduct one of the most active outreach programs in the nation. We sponsor outreach events in many local communities, where we conduct personal interviews with veterans and dependents about their claims, our decisions, and their benefits awards. Our outreach teams are made up of Veterans Service Representatives (VSR), Rating VSRs (RVSR), Decision Review Officers (DRO), and Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists who volunteer to participate in these outreach events.

When representatives of the General Accounting Office (GAO) visited our office recently, they recognized that our outreach program could provide an excellent model for use by other VA regional offices. At their request, we submitted a White Paper to GAO, outlining our outreach activities and community involvement.

We receive frequent compliments from veterans and community leaders about our outreach efforts. For example, the Community Affairs Specialist for KWTX Channel 10 Television said, "I'm seeing a great difference in the attitudes of veterans, because of the Waco VA Regional Office's outreach activities. The

veterans feel that the people at the regional office are listening and care about helping them.”

The well-being of Former Prisoners of War (POW) and their survivors is especially meaningful to us, because of the extreme suffering they endured while in captivity. We conduct Former POW Outreach Seminars frequently, in communities throughout our jurisdiction.

Through interviews at the seminars, we identify former POWs who are entitled to higher levels of VA disability compensation based on changes in legislation. We assist many surviving spouses of Ex-POWs who have never applied for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) at these events. Since we have had several recent legislative improvements, we are conducting a review to ensure that the former POWs in our service area are receiving all available benefits. Where former POWs are not in receipt of disability compensation at the 100 percent rate, we telephone them to encourage reopening of their claims. In many cases, we are able to award 100 percent evaluations based on Individual Unemployability.

Our employees are energized by their experiences at outreach events. One employee observed, “I came away with a renewed spirit, and a sharper image of how my job affects people’s lives.”

Local veterans service organizations are supportive of our outreach activities. They provide facilities where the meetings can be held, help publicize the events, and coordinate with veterans who have problems or need to discuss their claims with someone from our office. In our Veterans Advisory Council, we

are partners with representatives from all major veterans service organizations, and the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System.

Our central mission is to award the VA benefits and services that have been earned by our Nation's veterans and their family members. Last August, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi addressed over 1,000 veterans and dependents during a Town Hall Meeting in El Paso, which was sponsored by Congressman Silvestre Reyes. During that event, Secretary Principi made a statement that exemplifies the feelings of our employees about serving veterans. He said, "These are your benefits, and we are the means to help you gain access to them."

As a result of awards processed by our staff, over 151,000 veterans and dependents are receiving VA benefits each month. Nearly 110,000 of these awards are based on service-connected disabilities. Awards made at our office have produced VA benefits payments that total over \$90 million per month.

Our Veterans Service Center staff makes nearly 100,000 decisions on claims per year. Currently, we have 26,607 claims for which decisions are pending. In the past two months, we have reduced our pending workload by almost 3,000 claims.

In the last 12 months, we have established nearly 101,000 claims for processing, including original claims and reopened claims. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs initially proposed a regulation which presumed service connection for Vietnam veterans with Type II Diabetes, secondary to exposure to herbicides. Congress then followed with legislation which resulted in the Waco

Regional Office receiving over 4,400 claims for service connection for Type II Diabetes and related disabilities. Another 4,300 claims resulted from new legislation regarding VA's duty to assist veterans in the development of their claims. An additional 900 cases came from our completion of a review required by a U.S. district court decision in the case of *Nehmer v. VA*.

We strongly support President George W. Bush's commitment to make the processing of applications for veterans benefits faster, easier, and more accurate. As part of this effort, we are systematically implementing the recommendations of the VA Claims Processing Task Force. The task force was chaired by retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Daniel L. Cooper, who was sworn in as VA's Under Secretary for Benefits on April 2, 2002.

The Task Force submitted 34 recommendations for improving claims processing to Secretary Principi in October 2001. We have implemented many of the Task Force's recommendations. Even prior to the official release of the report, we had some of the recommended innovations in place.

We appreciate the opportunity to send claims to the Tiger Team established in Cleveland by Secretary Principi for rapid development, rating decisions, and award processing. Nearly 900 claims forwarded from our office have been processed promptly by the Tiger Team. Also, we sent ready-to-rate cases to the satellite rating activity at the Muskogee Regional Office, which has processed over 1,200 cases for our office.

We have implemented the Task Force recommendation that calls for making "partial grants" of benefits, while obtaining additional evidence. On

claims with multiple issues, we grant benefits on all the issues we can, and continue our efforts to obtain evidence on the other issues.

To assist in reducing workload, we have developed specialized claims processing teams, as recommended in the Task Force report. For example, we have a Special Service Team, which gives priority processing to claims that have received Congressional interest; and claims from veterans who are homeless, have other hardships, or have terminal illnesses.

Also, we have teams that specialize in performing the following activities:

- processing rating decisions
- preparing claims for rating decisions by obtaining necessary evidence
- processing appeals
- conducting personal and telephone interviews
- completing special projects, and processing burial claims
- performing general claims processing, and
- sorting claims and evidence received to establish automated controls.

Each claims processing team conducts “triage” reviews of claims as they are received. Using triage procedures, team members identify those claims which can be processed quickly, without the need to obtain additional evidence.

We also specialize within our Appeals Team. Task teams are assigned to process remands, Notices of Disagreement, hearings, and the oldest docketed appeals cases.

Fortunately, we have received additional staffing to address the increasing number and complexity of claims received within the past few years. This allows

hiring and promotions of capable employees to decision-making positions, including Veterans Service Representative (VSR) and Rating VSR (RVSR). We have 85 RVSRs who make rating decisions on claims. In addition, we have 14 Decision Review Officers (DRO) whose primary responsibilities are processing appeals and providing training to our rating VSRs. The VSRs support the RVSRs and DROs by preparing claims for rating decisions, and processing awards after rating decisions have been made.

We believe that our initial investment in training is an important key to improving the timeliness of claims processing. If an employee is trained well, he or she will work at a high level of quality. Timeliness is improved as a direct result, since employees save the time and energy it takes to rework cases because of errors. Increased accuracy enhances the service we provide to veterans.

Since many of our employees in decision-making positions have been hired or promoted recently, we provide intensive training for them. About half of our VSRs and RVSRs have less than 2 years of experience in their positions. We use the automated Training and Performance Support System (TPSS) and the Advisor program to provide computer-based training that combines interactive lessons with small group learning experiences.

To improve productivity and timeliness, we provide extensive, ongoing training to VSRs on effective screening of claims and reviewing of evidence. To streamline rating activities, we provide training on promptly identifying relevant medical evidence, and preparing effective written summaries in rating decisions.

We maintain a high level of quality in processing appeals. For the month of March 2002, the percentage of cases remanded back to our office from BVA was 8.11 percent, compared to 14.53 percent for all regional offices. Fiscal year to date, BVA has reversed decisions in less than 20% of the appeals from our office as compared to a national rate of more than 24%. The DROs and VSRs on the Appeals Team work closely with veterans service officers, to assist in resolving appeal issues or making timely submission of appeals to BVA.

In addition to the centralized training provided at the national level for both VSRs and RVSRs, we establish training teams for new or recently promoted employees. The teams remain together during a period of formal training, to gain practical experience in processing claims before becoming part of regular teams. This allows them to build a solid foundation of quality in claims processing, prior to experiencing the demands of managing a large workload.

We use Inventory Management System reports to carefully monitor and analyze the progress of claims in each stage or “cycle” of claims processing. This has assisted us in identifying and implementing specific actions to improve timeliness for each of the following cycles of claims processing:

- establishing automated controls for claims promptly upon receipt
- pulling claims folders and delivering them to decision makers
- obtaining the evidence necessary for accurate decisions
- completing rating decisions
- processing award actions and authorizing awards

In addition, we have developed written performance plans that establish specific requirements for VSRs and RVSRs for productivity, quality, and timeliness in claims processing. We review the quality of completed cases monthly, using a nationally developed quality review checklist.

For increased efficiency, we use the latitude given by VA Central Office for use of Rating Board Automation (RBA) programs to prepare rating decisions. We allow our more experienced RVSRs to use the regular RBA program for cases that have not been established previously in the newer RBA 2000 program. However, all recently-selected RVSRs are trained in and continue to use the newer system.

We carefully plan the use of available overtime funds to achieve maximum productivity. We focus the use of overtime funds on processing claims that have been pending for over 6 months, claims from veterans who are over age 70, and appeals and remands.

We have close working relationships with the nine VA medical facilities that perform examinations for our claims. We use videoconferencing, as well as personal visits, to discuss examination requirements and administrative procedures with the medical facility staff members. To ensure that exams are completed promptly and accurately, we communicate by phone when questions related to particular exams arise. Seven of the medical facilities return completed exams within 30 days of our requests; and the other two facilities are averaging 34 days and 41 days. The VHA standard or goal is thirty-five days.

We appreciate the assistance provided recently to regional offices by representatives of BVA. A BVA team working at the Cleveland Regional Office has assisted us greatly by processing Statements of the Case on appellate actions from our office. We continue to provide appellate cases to this team on a weekly basis. During a recent visit to our office, attorneys from BVA assisted us by:

- Reviewing and providing guidance on appeal cases,
- studying the effects of remanding cases back to regional offices, and
- developing improvements in procedures for obtaining additional evidence needed to process appeals.

We are in complete harmony with Under Secretary Cooper's vision of what our employees can accomplish in the future. In a recent letter to each regional office Director, Under Secretary Cooper wrote, "Most importantly, you lead (not manage) people, some of whom are experienced, some of whom are new, but all of whom are intelligent. Many of them have the potential to do things you never thought possible years ago. And, you are responsible for mentoring them, training them, and inspiring them to do things they do not even realize they could do."

We want to serve veterans, their families, and the citizens of Texas with all of the compassion they have earned and deserve. We make extensive efforts to ensure that veterans and their dependents are aware of the full range of VA benefits and services to which they may be entitled.

We have implemented multiple initiatives that improve timeliness and quality in processing claims. We have given special emphasis to processing the claims that have been pending longest, as well as appeals. We focus on promptly adopting innovations that allow more effective use of our staff, information technology, funding, and other resources. We are guided by Under Secretary Cooper's statement of absolute principles which must always dominate our actions: Integrity, Professionalism, and Accountability.

This completes my formal presentation to the Subcommittee. I will be happy to answer any questions.